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ABSTRACT

A stereotype is a standardized mental picture based on a common characteristic of a group of people, representing an oversimplified opinion or an uncritical judgment that is not reality-based. In order to understand the psychological basis of sex-role stereotyping it must be understood that the stereotype of men as strong, independent, and in control is based on psychological norms of mental health. Sex-role stereotypes begin at birth when babies are treated in stereotypic ways by families. Teachers continue stereotypic attitudes, regarding girls as better behaved and boys as having better bodies and brains. Sex-role stereotypes are often continued by peers, especially in puberty when sex-role expectations become even clearer. In language and communication, sex-role stereotypes are promoted through such thing as the Miss and Mrs. terms, which denote a woman's relationship to a man. Schools can perpetuate sex-role stereotypes through the teachers' unconscious attitudes, feminine atmospheres in elementary schools, sexist language in texbtooks, and by not challenging women high school students to take adequate mathematics and science courses. Bias against women in the workplace still exists. Stereotypic views of men and women are constraining and harmful to both genders. To correct this, each person can treat others as individual human beings, and not only as members of a group. Respect for the individual will enrich everyone's life, and only when it is achieved can people begin to challenge and change sexism in society. (ABL)

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MONOGRAPH

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THE IMPACT OF SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPING ON HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

A stereotype is a standardized mental picture based on a common characteristic of a group of people. It represents an oversimplified opinion or an uncritical judgment and is not reality-based. Sex-role stereotypes are stereotypes based on roles assigned to persons because of their sex.

All a person has to do to see how clearly stereotypes are defined by sex is to look at television advertisements and see boys playing with cars, trucks, and guns, and girls playing with dolls, dishes, and pastel ponies. Adult roles are also clearly stereotyped in advertisements: men are riding the range, sailing, touting legal firms, and driving flashy cars, but women are keeping house, worrying about laundry detergent, taking care of children, and preparing food. What are the messages of sex-role stereotypes? Boys and men are active and engaged in important work. Girls and women take care of other people. Men are assertive and independent, but women are passive and dependent.

Psychologists have long been interested in how children learn to be either masculine or feminine. Many theories have been developed to highlight the acquisition of sex roles. Some theorists argue that children learn sex roles from modeling the same-sexed parent or care-giver and from being rewarded for the *appropriate* sex-typed behavior. Others claim that children learn sex roles through a cognitive process of deciding what behaviors girls engage in and what behaviors boys engage in. The oldest theory, that of Sigmund Freud (1924), states that children learn sex roles by identification with the same-sexed parent and by fathers' rewarding daughters for feminine behavior and mothers' rewarding sons for masculine behavior. All theorists seem to agree that, by age three, children have generally acquired a gender identity and know that their gender is permanent and cannot be changed by merely changing clothes or deciding that one wishes to be the other sex. Carol Gilligan (1982) and others have contributed to the understanding that the psychologies of women and men are different. Women achieve identity through the establishment and maintenance of relationships, and men achieve identity through autonomy and achievement.

In order to understand the psychological basis of sex-role stereotyping, it must be understood that the stereotype of men as strong, independent, and in control is based on psychological norms of mental health. The standards for positive mental health in this society have been masculine, and those individuals not manifesting the *healthy* masculine characteristics have often been diagnosed as having problems. The stereotype of women as passive and dependent and needing to be taken care of comes from observations that women, because of their imbedment in relationships, do not manifest the same kind of autonomy, achievement, and control as men do. Stereotypes are as difficult to change as are the traditions upon which they are built, and in everything from child-rearing to church-going, stereotypes are visible and damaging to both women and men. Stereotypes based on sex constrain people to roles and prohibit and inhibit them from being what they are and becoming what they want.

SOCIALIZING FORCES IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Families

Where do sex-role stereotypes come from? They begin at birth but might begin earlier if parents know the sex of their baby before birth. The minute the sex of the newborn is known, the baby is often treated in stereotypic ways. There are many studies that demonstrate that infant boys and girls are treated differently. Girls are held more and spoken to more frequently than are infant boys (Lewis, 1972). Boys are expected to be independent earlier than girls, and boys are treated more roughly than girls, including being punished more often. Parents of newborn infants who were all the same length and weight described their daughters as being sleepy, pretty, and quiet, and sons as being big, husky, and active (Rubin et al., 1974).

Sex-role stereotypes are as difficult to change as stereotypes pertaining to race, age, religion, and handicap. Stereotypes are taught and maintained by the socializing processes that are experienced in the family, the church, the school, and the community. Families can unconsciously reinforce stereotypic role expectations that they intellectually disagree with. In families in which the roles are clearly defined (mothers caring for the children, preparing the food, and maintaining the family, and fathers doing the yard work and only helping with household chores), it is difficult for children to learn other than stereotypic

roles. Unfortunately, this picture seems to be representative of American families today, even though less than 7% of all families have wives and mothers who do not work outside the home. Research shows that working mothers with husbands spend at least 40 hours on the job and 40 to 60 hours involved in child care and home-related activities (Henley, Hamilton, and Thorne, 1985). The toll for this expenditure of physical and emotional energy will become more obvious in the future as women continue to work and raise families. The stress on husbands and fathers is also great. They have learned to provide at all costs and the pressure to learn new supporting tasks that have not been a part of their previous experience can be frustrating. Sometimes men are overloaded because they are asked not merely to assist in household tasks but to actually manage the household. Although this is a rewarding experience, it is often quite new for males.

Many families believe in parity parenting and nonsexist child-rearing. Fathers who nurture their young baby and actively participate in child care increase their range of experience. Many fathers who do make this choice report that their male peers often feel threatened and find it difficult to relate to a man who has strayed so far from the *normal* range of male behavior. However, fathers who are involved in child care report a high level of satisfaction in the development of a deeper relationship with their child.

In too many American families, boys are not as prepared to be fathers as girls are prepared to be mothers. Boys are often denied the nurturing experience that comes from playing with dolls; they can grow into adults who are unfamiliar with how to nurture their own children. Girls who are encouraged to take care of dolls but not to play with trucks and blocks become hesitant to pursue the many options now open to women in nontraditional careers. These girls can grow into adults who are unsure of their ability to do anything other than deliver and care for children. In the 1980s, many people are trying to change these old-fashioned ideas, but far too many children are growing up with the same sex-role expectations that occurred in the 1950s.

Clothing sends a very clear message about being born male or female; and the way people dress their children reflects their stereotypic sex-role expectations. Lace on socks, underpants, and dresses sends a clear message that girls are to look pretty and not get dirty. Boys, on the other hand, wear clothing that says they have things to do: nails to pound, pockets to fill, soldier and sports outfits for action. Infant boys are often dressed in major league uniforms. Infant girls could be too, but most people would be surprised to see a three-month-old girl dressed in a Cincinnati Reds uniform.

Teachers

Teachers also have a powerful impact on children and youth. Many teachers leave teacher-training institutions with a sex-role ideology firmly in place simply because of their own sex-role socialization. Throughout their school career, they have experienced women who teach, especially at the elementary level, and men who are principals and superintendents. Eighty-seven percent of all teachers are women, but only 2% of all superintendents are women. By college the picture darkens because only 26% of all college and university faculty are women and thus most of the instruction students receive is from men (National Center for Education Statistics, 1981). The end result of this is that, as Wise (1978) points out, teachers go into their first classroom assignment with the clear understanding that boys and girls are very different.

Research with teachers has uncovered some startling findings. Many teachers believe that one sex is *better* than the other (Pogrebin, 1982). Huston-Stein and Welch (1976) found that teachers divide their perceptions of *better:* they think that girls behave better but that boys have better brains and bodies, and more value in society. Girls learn in preschool to be quiet because teachers do not respond to girls' aggressive behavior in the same way they do to boys'. Girls can have temper tantrums and nothing happens, yet boys who behave aggressively or have tantrums learn that their behavior results in action or punishment (Serbin et al., 1973).

Myra and David Sadker (1982) have analyzed teachers' behavior and have found ample evidence that, from preschool through graduate school, teachers ask boys questions that lead them to find their own answers and ask girls questions that can be answered *yes* or *no*. Interestingly enough, most teachers deny that they treat girls and boys differently, until they see themselves on videotape.

College professors — both female and male — respond more frequently to the questions asked by male students. By college-age, it is clear to many girls that male students get their questions answered. The result of these interactions with teachers and professors is that many women do not pursue careers for which they are suited. Therefore, a great loss of human potential occurs, since many college women change programs rather than pursue courses of study in departments in which they are not treated fairly.

Peers

Children learn from each other. Parents who are trying to rear children without sex-role stereotypes are often dismayed when their four-year-old daughter claims that she is going to be a nurse and not a doctor because, as she matter-of-factly announces, *only boys can be doctors*. How does she know? Robbie, at preschool, told her. Young children use gender as a way of categorizing the world: Mommies do this and daddies do that, girls do this and boys do that. But often parents and teachers neglect to point out to very young children the exceptions to their hard-and-fast rules — daddies do indeed cook and launder and mommies do become doctors and lawyers. As children grow older, they become adamant about sex-role expectations for both sexes.

Fifth-grade boys may be quite reluctant to have girls on their teams, partially because at this age girls are physically more mature than boys and can often hit a ball with greater accuracy than can boys. Becoming a man in this society and living up to the masculine stereotype requires a lot of practice, so early in a boy's life he is encouraged to learn sports and to practice being tough in same-sex groups. Hence, Little League teams, Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, and other all-male groups have been firm in their insistence that these activities are for boys only. Girls who have broken the masculine barrier to play on a Little League team have often paid a heavy price for their athletic competence by being ridiculed and teased for wanting to be masculine instead of feminine. They are encouraged to either join an all-girl team or do something even more acceptable — sit on the sidelines and cheer for the boys.

As girls and boys reach puberty, the sex-role expectations and the stereotypes become even clearer. Teachers who are trying to help both genders reach their potential report their frustrations when a bright, competent, seventh-grade or eighth-grade girl who clearly has skills in math and science begins to care more about her eye shadow and her hair than she does about her science project or her computer work. There is a subtle message in this society that girls who are good students will not have boyfriends. Undergraduate students report they knew as early as high school that they had better not beat their boyfriend in tennis if they wanted to continue dating him (Huston-Stein and Welch, 1976). A math instructor reported that when girls make the choice in early adolescence to worry about popularity instead of grades, they can never catch up with the boys whose grades steadily improve during adolescence. Girls' grades steadily decline during high school.

Many adolescent girls have already learned to depend on men to take care of them and help them. They lack assertiveness and decision-making skills. Psychologists speak of learned helplessness, which is the inability to try a task because, without even trying, the belief exists that one cannot succeed (Gilligan, 1982). On the other hand, adolescent boys have learned to be tough, cool, and always in control of the situation. Even if a boy does not feel this way, he believes he should not let others know because this would be a sign of weakness, and it is often not acceptable for men to be weak.

Men and women both become somewhat limited in their range of emotions. Emotions such as loving, caring, and nurturing have been associated with women, and emotions such as conquering, competing, and enduring have been associated with men. The effects of these stereotypes are reflected in the practices of adolescent boys who gather to discuss sports and girls, and of girls who gather to discuss fashion and makeup. Attempts to shatter these stereotypes must continue to be strong and must be directed to all ages of people.

SOCIETAL FORCES THAT SUPPORT SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPING

Language and Communication

There are many men today who still get upset when they are designated a *chairperson* of a committee rather than a *chairman*. Why does it make a difference? The answer lies in the power of the English language to support the status quo. In this society, *man* has more status than *person*, so when a man is referred to as a *person*, he loses status. On the other hand, when a woman is called a *person*, her status is raised. Many groups have resolved this issue by using the word *chair* to designate the group leader, but there are many groups in which either women or men who are chairing are still called *chairman*.

The terms for a woman, Miss and Mrs., describe a woman's relationship to a man. The term Mr. does not indicate a relationship to anyone. Men have the power to name. Children have their father's surname, and wives take their husband's names. Conversely, upon marriage, a woman may choose her name — a man has no such choice without following legal procedures for a name change. Thus, naming, in our society, remains a powerful way of perpetuating sex-role stereotypes.

In examining the roles of women and men, patterns of communication are revealing. Both sexes often reflect their expected roles. Men interrupt women more than women interrupt men. Men control the direction of the conversation in a group of women and men. Men give information when they talk and often use aggressive terms. Women nurture and stroke in their conversation, complementing others on clothing and hair, and showing concern for others' health. Women share more information about themselves than do men, and women smile more. Men tell jokes and women laugh. There is no evidence, however, that women talk more than men, despite the stereotype that they do (Henley, Hamilton & Thorne, 1985). One can listen and watch for stereotypic language and communication when in a group of women and men.

School

Schooling is probably the one nearly universal experience that all children have. The main purpose of schooling is to inculcate students with the values of the society and the skills necessary for citizenship. Yet schools can serve to perpetuate sex-role stereotypes in a way that no other institution can. Teachers are products of school systems that have treated them differentially, depending upon their gender. Unconsciously they repeat, with the students they teach, the experiences they had in the educational system (again, a reminder of a point made earlier that most teachers are women and most administrators are men).

Teachers who attempt to be nonsexist, like nonsexist parents, often feel frustration at a system that seems to have the stereotypes so firmly in place. It can be disheartening to hear a kindergarten student state, *After the boys move the furniture, the girls will serve the cookies and punch*. It is equally frustrating to hear an announcement over the intercom that fifth-grade and sixth-grade boys are needed to carry boxes to the book room when, in fact, at this age girls are larger than boys and have more shoulder skeletal muscle and therefore are better equipped to carry anything!

Elementary schools, in particular, reflect a feminine atmosphere. The values inherent in the elementary school are the passivity and dependency that used to be expected of all females and children. This atmosphere can be harmful to both girls and boys. Girls traditionally learn to achieve for approval, not to ask questions unless they are the right questions, and not to demonstrate initiative or aggression. This passive, approval-seeking behavior is rewarded in girls even before elementary school, and it is not productive for girls in terms of helping them reach their fullest intellectual potential (Sadker and Sadker, 1982). Boys, on the other hand, have had very little training in being passive and dependent until they hit the doors of their first schooling experience and are told by the teacher to sit down, keep their mouths shut, and keep their hands to themselves! This is news to them and, consequently, during the primary grades, boys demonstrate more reading problems, develop more nervous habits, and do more bed-wetting than girls (Serbin et al., 1973). School can be a traumatic experience for both genders and the effects are long-lasting and hard to remediate in terms of sex-role stereotyping. The problems for children are compounded when other stereotypes, such as those regarding race, class, and handicap, are prevalent within the school setting.

Publishers of textbooks in the 1970s made a commitment to use nonsexist language. It is possible to find textbooks and workbooks that are faithful to that mission; however, textbook adoption practices result in old books' being used for years. Too many students today are still using science texts that have no women represented in them and social studies texts that are titled *Man and His World*. What a rich experience American history would be for all students if it were taught from a perspective other than white male's. There are *herstories*, but one can imagine that they are rarely adopted as the official text and are seldom even ancillary.

Far too many counselors in high schools still encourage girls to be nurses when they should be encouraged to pursue medicine. Career education attempts to help both girls and boys consider career options and nontraditional alternatives, but far too many adolescent women are not being challenged to even complete the three years of math and science that many colleges and universities are now requiring for admission. The latest statistics indicate that adolescent women without adequate high school preparation are probably denying themselves entry to at least 200 or more different careers, including many in professions related to math and science. This is a staggering effect of sex-role stereotyping on American secondary education.

Work

Often the popular press heralds the rise of women in corporate America and speaks of the great gains women have made in the workplace. Unfortunately, statistics do not bear the headlines out. Women are still clustered in low-paying, low-status, traditional jobs, such as waitress, clerk, and secretary. There are

women in middle management and successful women entrepreneurs but these are not the majority of women.

Bias against women still exists in the workplace of the 1980s, as women struggle to receive pay equity with men for doing the same work. Child care remains an issue for both women and men, and lack of adequate child-care facilities in the country is staggering, considering that women represent at least 50% of the labor force today. Equity in the workplace has not been achieved for most women and the effects of sex-role stereotyping are clearly seen in this society. There are still many who believe that men, who have to take care of women and children, do all of the important work.

THE EFFECTS OF SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPING

Nobody likes to think of this as a violent society but it would be difficult to deny the reality, presented in the daily newspapers and the television news. Much of the violence reported is by men against women and children. An analysis of masculine and feminine stereotypes provides some clues as to why. The feminine stereotype views women as inactive, dependent, incompetent, and needing help and protection, since they are unable to care for themselves. For the male, the stereotype includes suppression of emotions, stress on achievement, and the encouragement of anger and impulsive behavior. Staying emotionally *cool* is a strong value to men, and they expect women to acknowledge and defer to their authority. These stereotypic roles are constraining and harmful to both genders but are nonetheless clearly visible in this society. Indeed, there are many women and men working hard to free themselves of these harmful stereotypes, but still the stereotypes persist.

One can speculate about the role of sex-role stereotypes in the drug and alcohol addiction experienced by so many in this society. What is the price that both women and men pay for being assigned stereotypic roles? More women than men seek help for depression at mental health offices. Women often stay in marriages that are a *living hell* because they have been socialized to believe that if something is wrong in their marriage, it is probably their fault.

When one examines the profiles of alcoholics, sex offenders, drug offenders, dropouts, children who have reading difficulties, adults who are depressed, and people who lack self-confidence, it is striking to note that they all suffer from low self-esteem. It is certainly possible that being confined to a sex-role stereotype that denies the opportunity to reach one's fullest human potential could be a strong force in not feeling good about oneself. Pogrebin (1982) points out that boys are socialized to become men who will be in charge of something — the country, or a corporation. In reality, very few men ever reach that level of control. Their anger at their lack of control in the workplace can be brought home and directed to wives and children. A woman who feels denied any goal-oriented behavior or who has been informed that such behavior is inappropriate for her, may allow herself to become the victim of male anger because she believes that she deserves it.

The empowerment of women who are victims of rape and other types of violence is the primary emphasis for many women's centers and battered wives' shelters across the country. These shelters often have trouble surviving financially because far too many communities continue to deny the magnitude of the problem. It is necessary to keep in mind that not all abuse is physical; a large proportion of it is psychological. If boys are reared to deny their expressive characteristics and girls are socialized to be helpless and dependent, then violence, isolation, and low self-esteem will continue to be prevalent.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Sexism is alive and well in the United States in the 1980s and sex-role stereotypes maintain our sexist structures and institutions. Many are unwilling to recognize it; however, recognition is the first step. Racial stereotypes serve the same function for racism. Each person can begin his or her own crusade to treat others as individual human beings, and not only as members of a group. Be wary of statements such as *women are...* or *men are...* and do not use sexist language. Each person can generate her or his own list for change, but most importantly people have to free the children and young people from stereotypes, and help them understand how constraining sex-role stereotypes are. One of the most powerful ways to accomplish this feat is by modeling nonstereotypic behavior at home, at work, at school, and at church. Respect for the individual will enrich everyone's life, and only when it is achieved can people begin to challenge and change sexism in our society.

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